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Target killings force tribal leaders in Kandahar to flee

By Bashir Ahmad Naadem

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KANDAHAR - Following the increasing targeted killings of tribal elders in southern Kandahar province, a number of elders have left their areas and migrated to relatively peaceful parts of the province, the birthplace of Taliban movement.

Some Tribal elders had been killed in target killings in other provinces as well, but not as much as in Kandahar.

After the overthrow of Taliban regime in late 2001, more than 600 tribal elders, religious scholars, high government officials and ordinary workers of both government and non governmental organisations have so far been killed in Kandahar.

Over the past four months, the spate of the mysterious murders expedited when the news of an imminent military operation was echoed in media and the province started witnessing such incidents almost on a daily basis.

The deterioration of security in Kandahar has forced some government officials to quit their jobs and the tribal leaders to flee their areas and shift to either provincial capital or Kabul and Herat provinces.

One of them is Haji Khak Aka from Arghandab district. He told Pajhwok Afghan News that he left his home, orchards and farmland at his village and fled to Kandahar City one year back and he now lives in a rented house. He said he had to do that due to the threat from Taliban.

"I dont feel secure even in Kandahar City, thats why I stay home most of the time," said Aka, who added almost 99 percent of tribal elders of the district had left their areas and taken refuge in the city or other parts of the province.

Another elder from the same district, Haji Habibullah, says he left his village as a precautionary step to avoid the wrath of Taliban.

In response to a question that why Taliban target elders, he said the elders had a huge influence among people, something the Taliban don't want.

A tribal leader from Panjwai district says that armed men threatened tens of tribal elders of the district to either leave the country or die.

Haji Agha Lali Dastgiri, who is also deputy provincial council chief, showed the warning letters from Taliban to Pajhwok. He said this was the first time the Taliban took such a stand against tribal leaders.

Taliban deny sending such threatening letters to tribal elders, with their spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, saying they only target those people who work for international forces or the Afghan government. He said only their Sharia Courts decide on the fate of suspected people.

But Dastgiri says he has evidence which shows Taliban's involvement in threats to tribal elders. He said the warning letters to elders have been written on Taliban official papers with signatures of their leaders.

Following the threats, he said, a number of tribal elders visited some local Taliban leaders and asked them that it was un-Islamic to force people leave their homes and country.

Dastgiri said the local Taliban replied that it was beyond their authority and suggested the elders should go to neighbouring Pakistan and talked to Taliban leaders there.

Haji Ihsaan, a tribal elder from the same district, also confirmed the threats.

Dastgiri said the problem was serious and that he had officially informed the governor's house, police headquarters, intelligence agency, religious scholars, UN office, Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and Human Rights Commission about the seriousness of the issue.

He held the Taliban responsible for 99 percent target killings in the province, with the remaining one percent as a result of personal feud.

The elder said the Taliban believed in violence and wanted to bring tribal leaders under their control through intimidation and life threats.

Not only tribal elders, but government officials also do not feel safe in the province.

An official of provincial cultural and information department, who did not want to be named, said unidentified men have persistently warned him by phone to give up his job or ready to be killed. He quit the job and has been jobless for the last four months.

"The insecurity has also forced some families to leave the province and shelter in relatively calm provinces," the official said.

Chief of Kandahar provincial council, Ahmad Wali Karzai, termed the killing of tribal elders and influential people as a conspiracy against Pahtuns.

Without naming who were behind the bloodbath, he said the killings were the handiwork of the anti-Pashtun elements both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He said the enemies wanted to force people accept their demands. However, he asked security agencies to ensure security for tribal elders.

Kandahar police chief, Brig. Gen. Sardar Muhammad Zazi, said they were doing their level best to ensure security for tribal elders and government officials.

He cited routine police patrols and the establishment of checkpoints in and around the city.

Deputy police chief, Col. Fazal Ahmad Shirzad, acknowledged that the target killings were taking place in the province. He claimed they had intensified their efforts at thwarting the attempts on the life of tribal elders and government functionaries.

However, he said, some cases of target killings were the result of political rivalry and personal enmity.

The Kandahar governor's house in a statement said that personal enmities and conflicts raised over gaining contracts for projects were also a contributing factor behind the target killings.

The killings and concerns of tribal leaders come as operation Hamkari (cooperation) by Afghan and NATO forces in the province enters its four month.